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<div align="center">*The Outsiders* as Kid-Noir</div>

S.E. Hinton's novel, *The Outsiders,* turned film sensation through the ages as directed by Francis Ford Coppala in 1983 continues to win the hearts of Americans each passing year as middle schoolers across the country read and watch the magic of brotherhood unravel before their eyes. Coppola, known for his work directing *The Godfather* films, is *not* known for making noir films. When googled if *The Godfather* is a neo-noir, the top result that Google references states that, although the series is filled with all the violence that is expected of neo-noir, "No, because there's very little reference to classic noir." Flashforward ten years from the release of the first *Godfather* movie, and Coppola picks up a book by S.E. Hinton, a novelist known for her hardboiled stories set to teen living. More specifically, Hinton's debut novel *The Outsiders,* about two boys running from the law after a murder that challenges the boundaries between right and wrong and challenges classist hierarchy of American society. Soon thereafter, Coppola's first noir would be produced. This essay will define *The Outsiders* as a kid-noir. In order to achieve this, I will tackle the argument from a few directions. First, I will characterize *The Outsiders* as a neo-noir, visually and emotionally rooted in heavy noir influences. Then I will define kid-noir and finally, I will distinguish kid-noir from teen-noir and apply these ideas to *The Outsiders*.

The story of the Greasers versus the Socs depicts inequality and the ways in which social surroundings shape individuals' choices and their life chances. Both the book and the film emphasize the inherent inequalities in the U.S. Michelle Inderbitzin, a prison culture and juvenile

justice expert, discusses that *The Outsiders* captures a world of juvenile delinquency divided by

social class, "I learned from Ponyboy that people can be discriminated against simply because of

the circumstances into which they were born. He and his friends didn't ask to be born poor. They

didn't choose to come from abusive families in a rough neighborhood. They longed for better,

with little hope of getting it" (Inderbitzin 358). These themes of inherit inequality, division in

America, and failure of federal or social systems in the country are themes commonly found in

neo-noir. The failure of the American system oftentimes is what drives the plot of fan favorite

neo-noirs, such as *Pulp Fiction* in which desperate Americans are driven to drugs and murder for

a financial living. Within *The Outsiders,* there is also this scramble to fight for life, which is why

these teens form gangs in order to survive the violence they face from other groups. These

groups are divided by social class based on the economic status of the characters' families, thus

creating the division between the Greasers and Soc that lead to fatal consequences. Both the

book and film adaptation have these hard-boiled influences as is centered around crime drama,

just like typical noir genres. Dussere writes "a genre concerned above all with the seamy,

insurmountably destructive underworld that such books figure as the hidden truth of our daytime

social world" (Dussere 4). The main theme of *The Outsiders* is the horrible truth of the daytime

social world, but the realities of it are only physically manifested at night. The night time scenes

in *The Outsiders* which are shrouded in darkness and reserved for the tenses moments in which

Greasers and Soc faceoff, represent this underworld atmosphere that Dussere references and

expresses it aesthetically.

    One of the most distinguishable aspects of noir is its visual style on the screen. Noir is

best known for its harsh lighting and the stark contrast between highlights and shadows. While

The Outsiders is not set in black and white like classic noir films, however the film does not only

adopt its harsh lighting that shrouds the characters in heavy shadows, but has also kept the two-tone coloration of classic noir. Instead of black and white lighting, for instance, most of the film is shot in black and blue lighting, or in moments of hope, black and orange lighting. Even the opening credits consist only of these noir-inspired shots of black and orange, depicting town and country landscapes highlighted in orange while details like fences and trees are blocked in black shadows. These opening credits illustrate heavily noir inspired scenes right from the get-go, setting the visual aesthetic and noir tone immediately.

An important aspect about neo-noir in comparison to classic noir is that neo-noir also takes place in areas of vast land, rather than only cities. *The Outsiders* takes place in Tulsa, Oklahoma and while half of the story takes place in the busy small town, the other half of the story takes place in lonely, open country. Location is also very important in noir to achieve a compatible aesthetic. Locations help set tone and moods for specific scenes and moments in film noir. Brian Hollins, a film location connoisseur who has spent the last 20 years on the trail of movie locations all over San Francisco, explains that film noirs utilize their locations to elicit various feelings and reactions from the viewers, "Locations were often used to heighten suspense or fear. Viewers who would never go to potentially dangerous urban neighborhoods at dead of night find themselves there while watching a noir movie" (Hollins 50). He goes on to say that different lighting and angles help support the uneasiness experienced in these locations as well. *The Outsiders* does exactly this. Scenes take place outdoors at night in secluded areas that make the audience's skin crawl in suspense. It also uses different camera angles, such as low angles and high angles, to show power struggle within these thrilling scenes. For example, Ponyboy and Johnny are alone at the park at around 2:30 AM, and the setting already makes viewers nervous with the thought of what trouble the two weakest members of the group may encounter all

defenseless in a lonely park in the middle of the night. Then, when the two climb up the jungle gym and sit on top, we get a high angle that shows their eyelines just as a group of Socs walk into frame. However, the two lower themselves when approached, to show they no longer have the higher ground in the situation when Randy spits, "No, pal, you better watch it," indicating that the Socs are not threatened on Greaser territory. Once the Socs start drowning Ponyboy in the fountain, we get a low angle that draws attention to Johnny pulling a switchblade out of his back pocket, a great noir-esque use of mise en scene to highlight the most important component of a single shot. Then, in a spectacular use of camera direction, an upside down shot of an unconscious Ponyboy transforms as he wakes up and rolls over, revealing Johnny to be holding a bloodied knife, showered in blood, and a harrowing look in his eyes as the camera flips him from upside down to right-side-up and capturing the entire horrifying shot from a low angle. The use of location and dramatic camera angles in this scene creates the dramatic suspense and emotionally involved storytelling through mise en scene that viewers have come to expect from a neo-noir.

Returning to the idea that failure of the American system drives the premises of neo-noir, neo-noir can be centered around a variety of storylines and plots, however when boiled past the fat of it, all neo-noir can be whittled down to the same basic principles. As the genre relates back to its predecessor, these stories capture battles that blur the lines of right from wrong, tearing at the audience's perception of what is or is not morally correct. As author Cynthis Tompkins puts it, neo-noir exemplifies "the moral chaos in American society at large" (Tompkins 20). There is only a narrow gap between the heroes and the villains in neo-noir as both groups are cynical, disillusioned, and uncertain of their futures. *The Outsiders* showcases the moral chaos of American society which is exemplified by the classist war between the Socs and the Greasers.

The narrow gap between the heros and villains is visble here as both are at fault for murder - Johnny killing Bob - and attempted murder - Bob and Randy drowning Ponyboy. There are also admissions of guilt from the greasers, who Ponyboy says ask for a lot of the trouble they get into, highlighting that the heroes of the stories have blurred morals, just as the villains. And while Johnny was deemed a hero by the newspapers before his death, Dally, who also jumped into the church fire to save him, was also called a hero in the papers, but when he goes out guns blazing, Ponyboy says "Dally didn't die a hero. He died violent and young and desperate, just like we all knew he'd die someday" (Hinton 131). Conversely, the Soc are not completely evil. Bob, who led the group to drown Ponyboy, was merely a victim of his circumstances as a neglected child. Then there is Randy, who partook in drowning Ponyboy, but later testified to not have Ponyboy convicted during the trial over Bob's death, further blurring the lines between good and evil that noir is known for.

Neo-noir in a sense, is a tragic expression through cinema, which consists of the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of another individual, or the humanity of one's self. The world in which noir characters live is one of violence, betrayal, and corruption and the only way for characters to escape this world is through death. As literary and cultural critic Elisabeth Bronfen suggests, "the sense of a paranoid world transmitted in *film noir* need not be conceived exclusively as a cinematic refiguration of the political instability of the postwar period, especially when one takes into consideration its transformation since the 1980s into *neo-noir*. Rather, the fantasy scenarios *film noir* celebrates, with its protagonists fatefully entrapped in a claustrophobic world and unable to master their destinies" (Bronfen 104). Neo-noir traps the protagonist in a claustrophobic world and renders him/her incapable of deciding their own destiny, which is highly reminiscent of Johnny's story. The only way Johnny could escape the

world of violence in which he lived was through death - something he had been thinking about through suicidal thoughts until he was hospitalized from the fire. In a form of tragic irony, only then after his fate was set to die, did Johnny decide he wanted to live. Visually, the dutch angle of a beat up Ponyboy leaning over a burned up Johnny is indicative of a neo-noir style. Dally, too, only escaped his world consisting of violence, decadence, and intrigue through death, this death being purposeful and due to its black and blue blocking of shadows amidst the fog, is visually a more classic noir style than Johnny's. Ponyboy and Johnny are trapped in a claustrophobic world as they are forced into hiding in an abandoned church, and the world renders them incapable of changing their destinies: as greasers, towards Johnny's death, and therefore, towards Dally's death as well.

There is one major difference that sets *The Outsiders* apart from the basics of neo-noir however. Revolving a plot around adolescents inherently alters certains facets of storytelling. With adolescents comes themes of growing, maturing, and hope for the future. None of these details would be applicable in stories about adults that have fully matured, are less likely to grow, and are already living the future they already hoped for, or never would have dreamed of as children. Meanwhile, this is a story about a fourteen year old boy who still has all of these themes to experience. Suicidal Johnny ultimately wants to live once he is dying, but his destiny has been out of his control from the very beginning, once again evidencing that destinies are out of the individuals' hands in film noirs. By the end of the story, even in the midst of the tragedy in their lives, Ponyboy decides that he will do his best to overcome his environment and create better opportunities and better choices for himself. Although his social class and appearance will always lead others to perceive him in a particular way, he does not have to be a helpless pawn trapped by circumstances, which is why he picks track back up and starts working harder to get

into college. This subverts the ending that noirs typically have, that of a purely tragic end for the protagonist. While there are tragic ends for the protagonists, Ponyboy wishes to overcome his obstacles, something more tailored to a coming of age story-meets-noir rather than purely noir. This all has to do with the all important detail of Ponyboy's age.

Interestingly, a Master Thesis by Tucker focuses on teen-noir and while its main focus is *Veronica Mars* (among a few other teen-noirs including *Donnie Darko*), she does not mention *The Outsiders* except in only one of the chapters. Even when she does so, she only does so to illustrate the social structure, hierarchy, and disconnect of America within the setting of *Veronica Mars*. *The Outsiders* is referenced in the pilot episode of *Veronica Mars* when a gang of greaser-looking hoodlums approach the protagonists on the beach. One boy, wearing a jacket that closely resembles Dally's signature leather jacket from the movie, teases Veronica just as Dally teases Cherri. Then Wallace says, "I suddenly feel like I'm in a scene of *The Outsiders*," to which Veronica replies, "Be cool, Sodapop." This show is known for its teen-noir genre, just as the movie *Brick* blends themes of hardboiled detective work and teenagers. The inclusion of this reference is used to illustrate that the social disparity in *The Outsiders* is relevant to *Veronica Mars*. Given that it is written to emphasize the themes of noir in *Veronica Mars,* it indicates the themes of teen-noir within *The Outsiders* itself as well.

These teen-noir adventures present darker themes and technical features which set them apart from other productions aiming at young adults. The narrative and aesthetic characteristics reinvent and subvert the tradition of classic noir films and thereby create a sense of novelty. Teen-noir has characters, plots, motives and a visual aesthetic, that resemble the noir films created between the 40s and 50s, however the character motifs now have a twist. These characters include femme fatales, and the lonely detective, who within teen-noir, look slightly

diffferent: the femme fatale become the "good-bad girl" and the lonely detective becomes a troubled adolescent (Mancelos 149). Cherri takes on this femme fatale personality, driving Ponyboy and Johnny to their doom. Cherri is the cause of the troubles that flip Johnny and Ponyboy's world upside down, foreshadowed even by her first appearance in the story. When first introduced, she is fighting with Bob which demonstrates that getting involved with her is trouble right from the start. Bob's jealousy over her prompted his anger towards the boys, but Cherri's decisions to flirt and walk with the Greasers is what led to his jealousy. She even admits in the courtroom scene that "I could have made it simpler for the fight to not have happened in the first place." Ponyboy takes on the role of troubled adolescent that falls for the femme fatale's tricks, as he is adament about falling for Cherri, even after she ignores him at school and refuses to vist Johnny at the hospital on his deathbed, regardless of the fact that she is the one who led him there.

There are defining characteristics of teen-noir that are important to distinguish in order to define kid-noir. Film theorist Musante argues that film-noir and teen-film ultimately ask the same question: "How do we make personal meaning from a world that offers us no meaning in and of itself and, in fact, is rife with constructed detours to personal meaning (femme fatales), empty environments and fractured personalities that make it difficult to be and individual person, let alone a meaningful one?" (Musante 25-26). The author suggests that this question has manifested itself in the roots of these two genres which have provided the perfect outlet for the question and the existential consequences it has generated. He also says that film noir and the teen film have similar aesthetic and thematic patterns that work together to address the existential problems of an American society "that no longer offers any external creators of meaning" (Musante 26). Although some critics dismiss the teen-film as a shallow and meaningless genre, its connection

to noir proves that it may be saying something more interesting and existential than typically

given credit for. I believe that *The Outsiders* perfectly fits what Musante argues that noir and teen

film do, coming together in this single film to demonstrate a nihilistic view of a hopeless world -

up until the ending. The genres of noir and teen-film have melded together in *The Outsiders* to

form a kid-noir that captures the desire to find meaning in a meaningless world. Ponyboy often

tries to find meaning in the world as he constantly questions the Greasers' position on the social

ladder, poetry by Robert Frost, and the inevitability of death.

       There is still one main difference between the teen-noir of *Donnie Darko*, and the style of

noir that *The Outsiders* depicts. This difference is so outstanding that it must be defined, which is

why *The Outsiders* cannot fit into the same teen-noir category as *Donnie Darko*, but must instead

be verified in another subgenre: kid-noir. The phrase *kid-noir*, according to my research, can

only be found in one other work thus far, in Alain Silver's essay "Son of Noir" which only

includes the idea fleetingly in this single sentence: "Guncrazy (1992) is not a remake, but a

mixture of fugitive couple and 'kid noir' concepts" (Silver 331). Despite not further explaining

this concept of kid-noir, when watching *Guncrazy* (1992), it is clear. It includes the same major

difference that sets it and *The Outsiders* apart from teen-noir. Donnie Darko perfectly adheres to

the themes of nihilism found in noir, but the Outsiders do not fit into that box completely and the

reason for that is because the Outsiders have something that Donnie does not: fun. While Donnie

Darko rarely smiles in the entirety of the film, the moments in which he does are shortlived and

only in regards to humorless fatalism, like when he takes about his mental illness or during the

aftermath of calling Jim Cunningham "the fucking antichrist." On the other hand, there are entire

scenes and montages dedicated to the Greasers having a good time in *The Outsiders*, such as the

montage before the movie theater scene when Dally takes Ponyboy and Johnny for fun

adventures backed by the energy-pumping, fun song "Gloria" by Van Morrison's band, "Them."

During this montage, even violence can be fun, as the trio watch some greasers fight at the gas

station and go on to intimidate and chase some kids for fun. *The Outsiders* is filled with

lighthearted and fun moments that bring the gang together to balance out the tragedies they must

endure together in a sort of childish innocence that only kid-noir can capture.

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